Dr. Johanna Budwig - Her Life

Dr. Johanna Budwig (1908 – 2003)

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The turbulent life of a many-sided, talented personality

Despite misfortunes and adverse conditions, Johanna Budwig was able to become one of the most successful scientists of her time. As a graduate in chemistry, a licensed pharmacologist, the recipient of a PhD in physics, a healer, an inventor, and an author, she made outstanding contributions to the study of fats and their effect on the body. She developed a method of paper chromatography, through which she was able to prove the existence of polyunsaturated fatty acids. Dr. Johanna Budwig- who studied in the footsteps of Nobel Prize winner Otto Warburg- was convinced that many serious illnesses affecting modern society, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depression, and cancer, were caused impaired cellular respiration, due to modern eating habits and their reliance on industrially produced food.

Her Birth

A fateful start to life

As Johanna Budwig was born on the 30, September, 1908; to Elisabeth and Hermann Budwig, a turbulent year was coming to an end. At that time, no one in the home could suspect how significant this year would become for the later development of their daughter, Johanna. It was in precisely that year that Prussia became the last state to give up its opposition to women being allowed access to higher education. As of the commencement of the winter semester 1908/09, women were finally granted the opportunity to take part in university studies in Prussia- and with it- in the whole of the German Reich.

However, despite society slowly becoming more liberal, traditional values and social norms still had a controlling influence on the everyday Germans. In other words, the belief still dominated that a woman's place was taking care of the home and raising the children, while it was her husband's duty to go out and provide for his family. But it is precisely that which Johanna's father- a simple, hardworking motorman- found himself unable to do following the death of his wife in 1920. No longer able to care for the girl, he handed custody of Johanna over to the state. Johanna was devastated by the loss of both of her parents. Nevertheless, some good did come as a result. As a ward of the state, Johanna was exempted from paying school fees, which allowed her to attend a public school where she attracted attention for her excellent analytical skills.

The Deaconess

The cornerstone is placed

The year Johanna Budwig turned 16, Germany was just beginning to recover from the effects of the First World War. During the Weimar Republic, research and science gained new appeal. Every third Nobel Prize awarded in this time went to academics from Germany. Inspired by their example, the young Johanna decided to enroll in the Protestant sisterhood, a deaconess motherhouse in Kaiserswerth. Johanna had recognized that, in order to reach her goals of becoming a researcher and inventor, she would need a first-class education.

The first modern deaconess motherhouse, "Diakonissenanstalt Kaiserswerth," was established in 1836 by Pastor Theodor Fliedner in Kaiserswerth. His wife, Friederike Fliedner, served as the first superior in the home. Under her leadership, it was soon recognized as the most reputable deaconess motherhouse. It was precisely this institute which Johanna chose to attend and where she- once again- attracted attention for her exceptional intelligence. She quickly completed her training as a novice caring for the sick and weak and subsequently dedicated herself to caring for patients at the diaconate hospital. At the request of the motherhouse, Johanna continued her education at the Oberlyzeum in Kaiserswerth from Easter, 1929; to February, 1931; where she finished at the top of her class. On March 30, 1932; Johanna Budwig was awarded the title of deaconess.

The Student

The launch into her academic career – Johanna becomes Dr. Budwig

The deconess motherhouse in Kaiserswerth was a godsend for Johanna. In addition to having its own hospital, pharmacy, and boarding school, the deaconess motherhouse was also able to offer Johanna the opportunity to study pharmacology. In October, 1932; Johanna Budwig began her basic pharmaceutical education in Berlin. She even interned in the pharmacy of the renowned Charité, before completing her education with the highest mark in Potsdam in 1934. Thus she finally earned her qualification to study pharmacy in Königsberg and Münster. She successfully completed this course of study in 1936, becoming a pioneer of her time as one of the few women in those days to hold a Diploma in chemistry and a state license for pharmacy. It was these subjects which formed the foundation of her future research.

It was then that her professors- particularly the already then established Prof. Dr. Kaufmann aka 'the pope of fatty acids'- began to recognize her brilliant analytical thinking skills. From October 1936, to May 1938, she worked as a research assistant to Prof. Kaufmann at the Institute of Pharmacy and Chemical Technology of the University of Münster. It was also during this time that she prepared her dissertation. On July 3, 1939; Johanna Budwig completed her studies and was awarded her doctorate title in the field of science by the University of Münster.

The Pharmacist

Her return to Kaiserswerth

In 1940 Dr. Johanna Budwig- now a licensed pharmacologist- would return to the deaconess motherhouse and assume management of its pharmacy. While Germany gradually engaged the rest of the world in an insane war, the sober-minded and natural leader Dr. Johanna Budwig kept busy organizing and expanding the pharmacy.

Wartime demanded special measures: Kaiserswerth housed more than 2,000 inmates, many of whom were in need of medications. During a time of ration cards and a thriving black market, supplying these people was a duty which fell to Dr. Budwig. She embraced this responsibility and- always with her main duty in mind- flouted the rules ascribed by the ultraconservative deaconess motherhouse. As a result of this, her professional career was rocked by controversy in the year 1944. After receiving numerous complaints about Dr. Budwig, the motherhouse considered transferring her to the institute's clinic as a disciplinary measure. Suddenly faced with the possibility of not being able to continue the research she had begun in the pharmacy and under protest of the governing institute, Dr. Johanna Budwig continued to run the pharmacy into the year 1948.

The Researcher

The investigative mind calls

Dr. Johanna Budwig was not a politically-minded woman. The sheltered life in the deaconess motherhouse had hardly ever brought her into contact with the rulers of the Third Reich, which allowed her to pass through the denazification proceedings by the British unopposed. Nevertheless, after 25 years as a deaconess, she was ready for a new professional challenge. On 30, July, 1949; a financially secure Dr. Budwig left the deaconess motherhouse in pursuit of new pastures.

Her path led her directly to her new scientific mentor: Dr. Prof. Kaufmann. He had a great appreciation for her superior intellect and generously provided her with research equipment. The "pope of fatty acids" was not disappointed: at a conference in Munich in October 1950, Dr. Johanna Budwig was the first scientist to present evidence for the existence of both saturated and unsaturated fatty acids.

Everything had suddenly clicked into place. In 1951, she was appointed as the expert consultant with regard to pharmaceutical products and fatty acids at the Federal Institute for Lipid Research. Simultaneously, she began researching commercial fats, and had thus- without even knowing it- engaged a mighty opponent. Post-war Germany was experiencing an economic revival. Gone were the times of rations and butter substitutes- people were finally able to indulge themselves again. Rich and plentiful food was what the people sought after. The German food industry reported record profits. It was not an ideal time to be a fatty acid researcher whose studies, in 1952, confirmed the harmfulness of trans fats. These findings were met by an outcry from the young, but powerful margarine industry, whose claims she refuted with meticulously kept statistical records.

Dr. Johanna Budwig now had opponents, the scope of whose influence she could not begin to fathom. For her- a scientist first and foremost- publishing results was obviously top priority. By 1969, she alone had registered eight processes for the manufacture of non-hazardous food products with a long shelf-life.

From this point on she found herself unable to ignore the obvious relationship between diet and disease progression. She continued to immerse herself in the relevant subject matter. She rapidly gained analytical insights which overlapped into other scientific disciplines. Although she was a licensed pharmacist, a graduate in chemistry, and held a PhD in physics, she needed to expand her expertise into medicine in order to make her contribution to medical science. It was for this reason that she began to study medicine in 1956.

Just one year later, she was able to demonstrate the different effects of omega-3 fats on the body using animal studies. Her extensive educational background allowed her to examine each finding from a variety of scientific perspectives. This in combination with her hunger for knowledge led to her turning out results at a rate which earned her wonder and envy from her academic peers.

That which is true, is to remain true

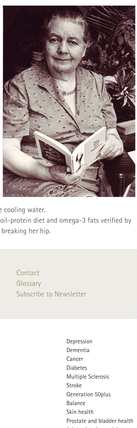
One can only speculate about the reasons for what occurred during the fifties. Rapidly following the publication of her first study on the harmful effects of trans fats, the Ministry of Culture of North Rhine-Westphalia confidentially set about gathering information on Dr. Johanna Budwig. It was not long before the financial authorities followed suit, scrutinizing her finances. Due to her criticism of the margarine industry, even her mentor turned his back on her, leaving the vulnerable Dr. Johanna Budwig incapable of continuing her medical studies. In the meantime, she summarized the results of her years of study in the pursuit of developing a diet which could prevent diseases and be used to treat existing ailments. It quickly became clear to her that, in addition to the positive effects which omega-3 fats have on conditions such as dementia and depression, their effects on cancer should also be evaluated. This was a fatal mistake. She lacked the field trials in the early sixties necessary to document the mechanisms by which her oil-protein diet worked. After a one year, personally financed expedition to world's leading lipid research institutes, Dr. Johanna Budwig settled 1962, in Bad Zwischenahn. It was there that she tried to lease recuperation clinics from the diakonia in order to turn them into centers in which to test her oil-protein diet. This was her only hope for performing the necessary field trials on patients. Unfortunately, she was met with rejection from all areas of the Republic. However, she was not ready to give up.

The Inventor

An inventor by passion

In the years between 1962 and 1970, the researcher fulfilled her second life dream of becoming an inventor. She applied for patents all over the world and tried to market them. Nearly all of these inventions had something indirectly to do with the oil-protein diet. It was therefore not surprising that not a single manufacturer was willing to indulge her ideas. The web of dependencies between large corporations and margarine industry was woven too closely. Dr. Johanna Budwig openly described these circumstances in her highly acclaimed, scientific books, expressing her acrimony, but not promoting her credibility. The fight against the authorities- particularly the tax authority- was taking more and more of their time. Aside from her nephew, the unmarried Johanna had no one to confide in. The oppressive feeling of being persecuted and subjected to reprisals as a result of her research findings became a central theme in her life.

The Healer



A new beginning as a healer

In order to finally obtain the required access to patients, Dr. Johanna Budwig completed her training as a healer in 1966. She was able to put the oil-protein diet into practice with patients from around the world over the next 20 years. And- going by the letters of thanks she received- with considerable success.

Other scientists were of a different opinion. Because she had been alienated from the research and academic communities, Dr. Johanna Budwig documented her successes in various fields in a number of books over the following years. Almost as if to spite her critics, however, she did not use these as a platform to discuss her scientific evidence regarding the positive effects of her oil-protein diet, but focused instead on the more important aspect of cancer treatment.

The number of anecdotal reports claiming astonishing success with regard to the treatment of cancer was increasing. However, the lack of verified scientific evidence made Dr. Johanna Budwig an easy target for her critics. Nevertheless, she was nominated for the Nobel Prize in medicine seven times in 1979. Tirelessly, the researcher- who was getting on in her years- traveled the world accepting invitations to hold talks to audiences of her peers. Her books were translated and sold a quarter of a million copies in North America alone. Simultaneously, she continued her research in diverse fields using her own resources. In 1982, she submitted a patent for the use of ruby lasers in nuclear power plants to increase the radiation absorption capacity of the cooling water.

Dr. Johanna Budwig did not live long enough to see her theories about the effects of the oil-protein diet and omega-3 fats verified by modern science. At the age of 95, she died in 2003 from complications which arose after breaking her hip.

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